



Rosemary Zine



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FOREWORD

Gay representation in media, particularly for women, has always been controversial.

By now in 2023, there have been many depictions of on-screen and on-page romance between women, foremost examples being Marceline and Princess Bubblegum from Adventure Time, Catra and Adora from She-Ra and the Princesses of Power, Vastra and Jenny from Doctor Who, and of course, Ruby and Sapphire from Steven Universe.

Even though 2009 was only 14 years ago, things were not the same. On-screen lesbians were few and far between and received far less time in the spotlight. The colloquial examples are Brittany and Santana from Glee as well as Willow and Tara from Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the latter of which depicted the tragic death of one of its members as a plot point. Though we had come a long way, television and film had to tiptoe around the issue of women loving other women. The legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States didn't occur until 2015.

For those fans who read Homestuck as young readers in 2009 and onwards, Rose Lalonde and Kanaya Maryam were the first example of a proudly earnest lesbian couple, a couple consisting of two main characters, neither of whom experienced the tragic "Fridging" trope queer people have become all-too familiar with. Their first real lesbians.

For all of his follies, Andrew Hussie seemed committed to these two, to prove that a romance could be drawn from the complex miasma of Homestuck.

Even after 2009, Rose Lalonde and Kanaya Maryam retain an earnest quality, a realness and an authenticity that remains unparalleled. For those readers who read Homestuck in Viz media published books or archivally on Homestuck dot com or through the Unofficial Homestuck Collection, Rose and Kanaya are special.

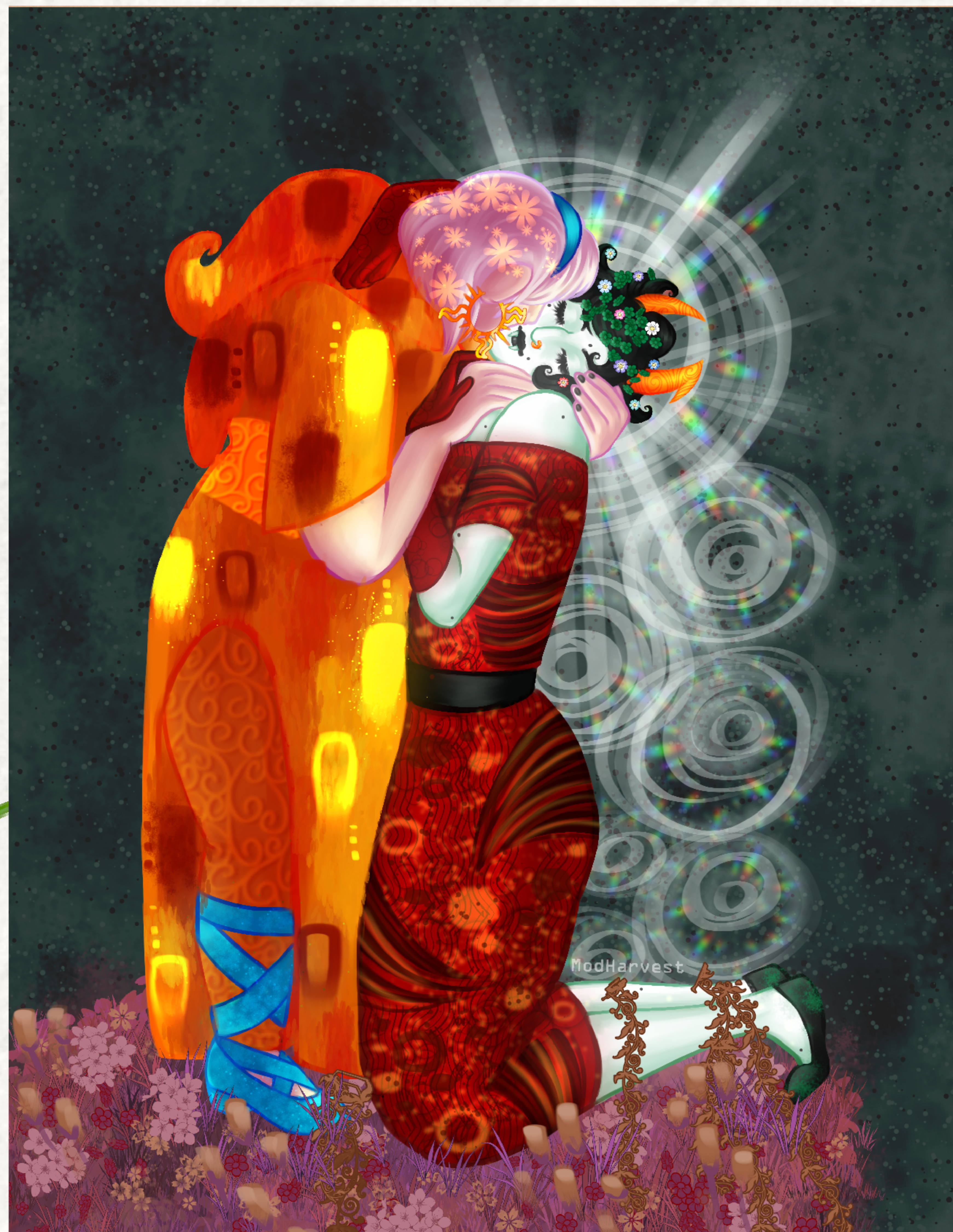
The way in which these two women are special cannot be put to the page in words and I will spare you from trying. Rose Lalonde, the quick-witted and dry-humored blonde writer and Kanaya Maryam, the tenacious and tough fashionista from across the multiverse are already familiar to you. Understand why these two and the relationship they share are special not through my cheap words, but from the rich and heartfelt pieces of art from across the Homestuck fan community.



I would like to humbly present to you the viewer, the Rosemary Zine.

 microwavablebees





  modharvest



 ghostedglitch

DUALITYS
DOWNFALL

Yahrzeit for Jaspers

By Jonaya Riley

"You are doing another candle thing, I see." Kanaya squinted at the small, squat candle encased in a glass jar that Rose was holding in her hands. "This one looks different than the ones you used last week."

Kanaya and Rose stood together in front of a small table in their living room. A living room in a house that they'd shared on Earth-C for years now - enough years to put some time and distance and a child (currently staying with uncles Karkat and Dave) between them and Sburb. Between them and the end of the world.

"No, it's... it's not the same. That was," Rose paused, turning the candle around in her hands. "That was different."

"I confess I am still getting the hang of the different candle things your tradition has. It seems there are several. They are all different."

"Well, naturally, otherwise they'd all be the same... candle thing." Rose stopped turning the candle and smiled at Kanaya. "Maybe we need a better way of referring to the collective entity that is rituals involving candles. Something better befitting the dignity of a millennia-old people."

Rose paused, furrowing her brow. Again, her gaze turned to the candle in her hands - she vaguely remembered seeing ones like it in the grocery store once as a little girl, but those had a small label with some Hebrew writing she couldn't read and a small bit

in English proudly announcing that the candle would burn for 26 hours... more or less.

"Anyway, this one is different." Something rough in her voice this time, like she had something caught up in her throat. Which, she supposed, was kind of true - in a metaphorical sense, anyway. Metaphorical lump in the metaphorical throat. She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry.

She wasn't sure how to feel about this. She reached down to the table and put her hands on the smooth, wooden surface. More than anything, Rose wanted for there to be a picture on the table, but she didn't have one. Only a candle, and the lighter than she'd set down in the middle of the table.

"You say the words first, right?" Kanaya asked, smiling slightly. "I think I remember them."

Rose pursed her lips and reached to grab the lighter with her free hand. "No, this one... there's no words. Not right now, anyway. Maybe later."

She flicked the wheel of the lighter and it spat fire a half-inch into the air, a conflagration in miniature dancing in her hand. Tilting the candle upside-down, she touched the wick to the flame and waited a second... two seconds... the flame spread to the wick, and once she was sure that it had caught, Rose turned the candle over and set it down in the middle of the table. The lighter, its purpose fulfilled, went into the back pocket of her jeans.

"So, do you plan to explain this particular ritual to me? Not to mention how it is different." Kanaya was smiling at her, warm and understanding.

"Well, those were shabbos candles - for shabbat. This is a yahrzeit candle."

"Of course. Those are completely different words." Kanaya nodded sagely, closing her eyes and looking serious for a moment. "It would be ridiculous to mix them up."

"You don't know what they mean."

"Oh, of course not."

"Okay, well, we did the shabbat thing last week on Friday evening. Because that's when you're supposed to rest and spend time with your family. You say a blessing when you light the candles and that's... nice."

Rose glanced down at the small, dim flame flickering inside its glass enclosure. "This is different. This candle is for a yahrzeit... the anniversary of someone's death."

"Oh." The smile faded from Kanaya's face, replaced by a look of... was it confusion? No, not that - more like... Kanaya's next question made it clear. "Whose death, exactly? We have experienced a few."

Rose nodded. "Jaspers."

She saw a few different emotions play across Kanaya's face in response, but mostly it was confusion. "Your cat? I just want to make sure there is not a long-lost human uncle Jaspers of which I was not previously aware."

"Never mind, this is stupid." Rose sighed, suddenly feeling more than a little bit silly that she'd had this idea in the first place. She reached down to grab the

candle - bringing it up to her face to blow it out - when she felt Kanaya's hand on her arm.

"No, don't do that. It is not stupid."

"It's just... it's a fucking cat, Kanaya. I'm being silly. I just... I don't know..." She set the candle down again and turned toward Kanaya, putting her arms around the troll's waist. She could feel the tears burning up behind her eyes, threatening to roll treacherously down her cheeks. "I just wanted something... low stakes."

"Darling you are experiencing the thing you humans get with the increased eye moisture."

Rose walked around Kanaya, trailing her arms along her hips and making her way slowly to the nearby couch. With a sigh, she sat down heavily, feeling the cushions give way.

"Oh come on, Kanaya, trolls cry too." She closed her eyes and leaned back. "You're being absurd."

"Flighty, even." Rose felt the couch dip down as Kanaya sat next to her. "I was only trying to lighten the mood."

"Yeah, I know." Rose opened her eyes but didn't look at Kanaya, instead choosing a point on the ceiling to focus all her attention on. "I didn't... I don't." She paused, then groaned audibly, letting herself settle deeper into the cushions.

"I don't know," she finally said, noncommittally. "I guess I wasn't expecting this one thing to be so hard. You know... I've technically been Jewish all my life!"

Kanaya placed a hand on her knee and she smiled

over at her wife. When Kanaya stayed quiet, Rose continued, her voice a little bit lower.

“But I guess it’s not something I’ve thought much about. Spent a lot of time almost… resenting it. I don’t know - that’s not the right way to put it. Resenting…”

She stopped, thinking - trying to place the words she was looking for. In her mind, a memory resolved itself unbidden, faintly clouded by a decade and a half of time and a lifetime of experience. She was twelve years old and sitting by herself at the downstairs table, a small plate set on the table… the Passover haggadah she’d printed off the Internet smoothed out in front of her. Trying to speed through the words because her mother had already checked out early to go pass out upstairs and Rose didn’t want to be doing this by herself, feeling more and more self-conscious with every word.

But the story hit different when you’d had to flee for your life.

“Resenting that I never got to just have a normal life, I guess.” Rose sighed heavily and put a hand over her head. “Like, what do you do when you can do the kinds of things that God’s supposed to be all about?”

Kanaya shrugged, but didn’t say anything.

“I’ve never really been about defining things in a rigorous way. Kind of hard to wrap your head around it when you’ve literally seen a world created in front of you… but then, who made Sburb? Who made any of it? And if I were in the business of wanting definitive answers, being Jewish isn’t really the right place for it. More like… having the framework to keep asking questions. Literally forever.”

“If I may - what does this have to do with your old cat or candles?”

Rose stopped and looked at Kanaya for a moment. Somewhere inside her, she felt something click, and then all at once she couldn’t stop giggling. Like what she’d just said - or Kanaya’s response to it - was so utterly absurd that she couldn’t make heads nor tails of it. It was just funny, in the end, how much she didn’t know about any of it. She wasn’t used to being in that position - to having to ask questions that she knew full well she’d never have a full answer to. The burnt-out-gifted-kid part of her railed against the possibility - even as the part of her that had peeked beyond the veil of life itself rejoiced.

“I guess nothing, directly. It’s not about understanding anything - just remembering. Just looking back and seeing how someone was important to you, even if they’re not there anymore.”

“So… not just the cat?”

Rose shook her head. “No, obviously.”

Kanaya stood up from the couch and walked over to the table. Wordlessly, the troll began searching the area, checking the various drawers and the nearby cabinet. Finally, in the storage bin perched atop the low shelf, she found what she was looking for. Taking the small, glass-enclosed candle in one hand and the lighter in the other, she turned back to the table. The flame of the lighter flicked into meager existence.

“Are there words you are supposed to say now?” Kanaya asked quietly. Rose shook her head, feeling the hot sensation behind her eyes again - the threat of having to show vulnerability to someone.

“No, not now either. Just… who is this for?”

Kanaya held the candle upside-down, mirroring what Rose had done a few minutes ago, touched the flame to the wick of the candle and held it a moment, then set the candle down next to the first one.

“For my…” She paused, thinking of the words. “For my mother. For your mother. For all of the ones we’ve lost.”

The troll put the lighter back, not saying anything more. And the tears were there in earnest now, silently rolling down her cheeks - tracing warmth across her skin. She wasn’t sure how to put into words how much this meant to her - how much her heart ached at the sight of this single, small thing that her wife was doing. It’s just a candle.

The tears didn’t seem to want to listen, continuing their march to the line of her jaw.

Under her breath, Rose muttered one of the few Hebrew phrases she knew by heart.

“Darling? Did you say something?” Kanaya’s voice from across the room. Rose looked up and smiled at her wife, wiping the lines of moisture from her face.

“It means… may their memories be a blessing. Something you say… to remember the dead.”

Sometimes, it was just a candle, and that was enough.

Fin



 ttsquid



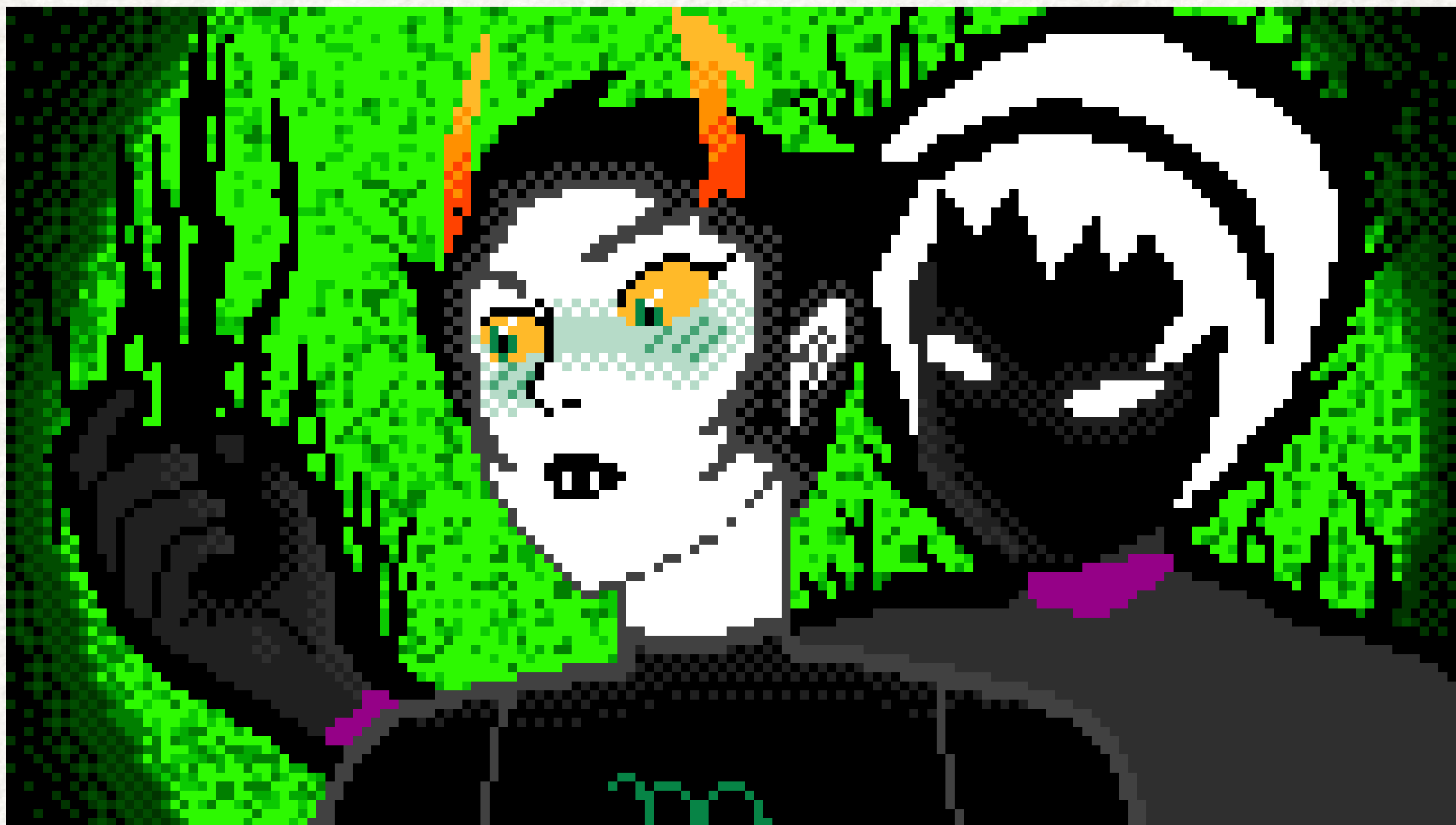
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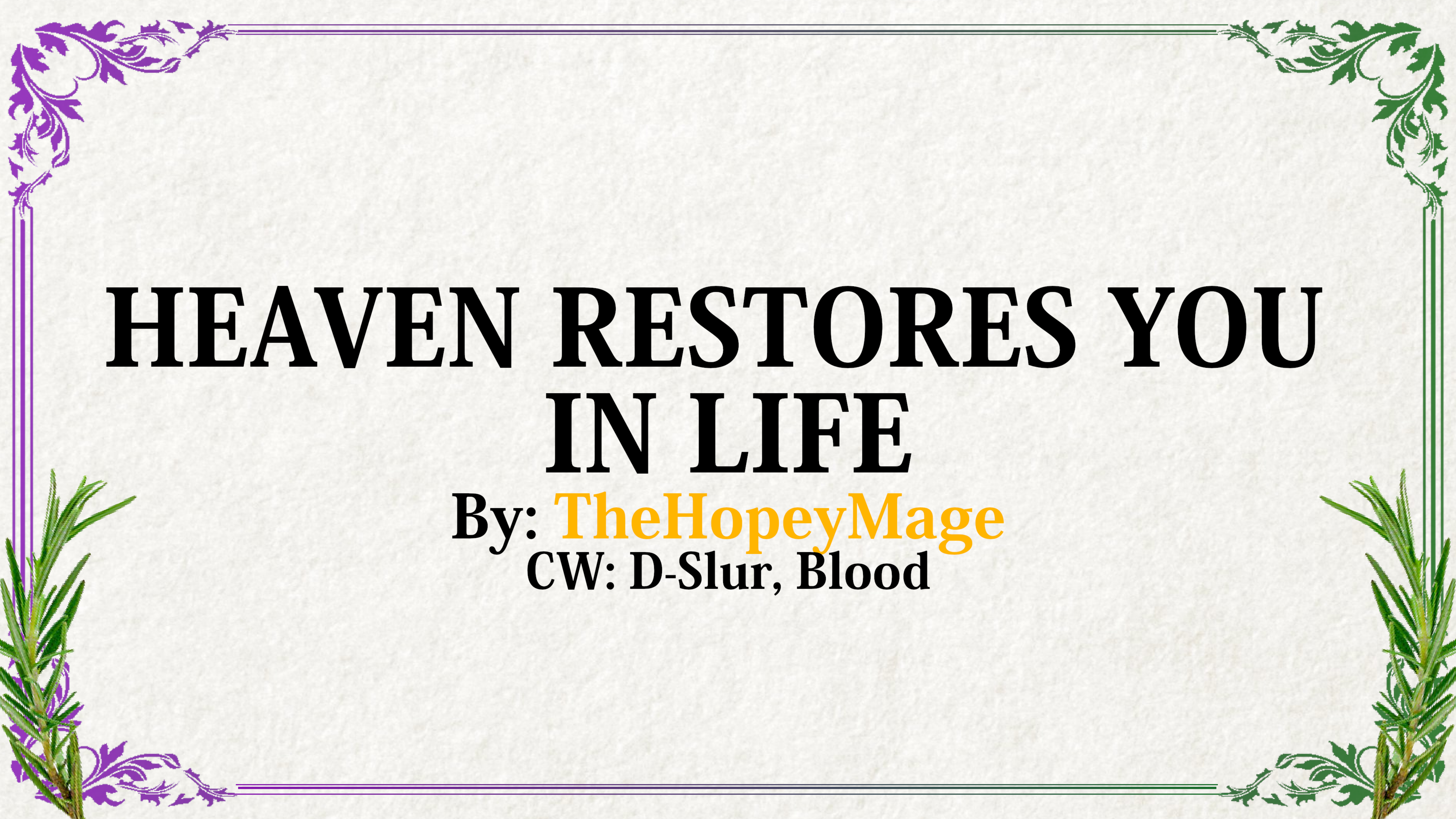


[femmetuck](#) / [cherry](#)



 [hiddenkrypt](#)

 [comradekanaya](#)



HEAVEN RESTORES YOU IN LIFE

By: **TheHopeyMage**
CW: D-Slur, Blood

The rain beats down on the roof of your car. You are late for class. You close your eyes and listen. The chatter of university hallways feels so far away now, as does the class you are currently late for.

Your name is Rose Lalonde, a Student of SNU, and it's beginning to get cold. You grab your umbrella from the back seat and sigh dramatically to yourself before exiting the vehicle.

The main campus building of your school is mostly ordinary. It's perhaps just too much time looking at it that makes it feel so off to you. It's taller than it is wide, which you suppose is fine, but you can't think of what rooms you haven't been to that necessitate that much vertical space. It has a brick wall, occasionally carved with symbols that are, you would guess, completely random. Roman numerals, the shapes of plants or objects, frogs... It's a looming thing. You can't understand it. You get a ping on your phone.

GG: i see you standing dramatically in front of the building rose, get inside or youre going to get soaked!

You roll your eyes. You have an umbrella. Before you can begin reluctantly heading to class, you get bumped aside and passed by a large man.

RANDOM DOUCHE: Hey, watch where you're going, dyke!

Before you can hit him with a pre-planned retort as you have practiced so many times in the shower, just for lesbophobic occasions, he's already gone. One of his cronies throws a, "Move it or lose it," your way, which seems tame in comparison, but just calling the obvious

lesbian the lesbian slur is a bit to be desired in terms of creativity as well. Opportunity lost on both sides.

A woman walks by, stopping beside you. You don't know her. She's quite tall. In a layered top and skirt with short, wispy hair. She is staring daggers at the door in your assailant's wake.

ROSE: Can I help you?

KANAYA: Hm

ROSE: Excuse me?

She barely pays you any mind at all. She looks like she's concentrating on something that isn't there. You go ahead and just leave for class.

The halls are mostly empty, save a few tardy individuals of varying levels of stress. None of your friends. You would guess that they are all in their classes, as they were meant to be, if not for the fact that one of them keeps messaging you.

GG: who was that!?

TT: Who, the man who pushed me?

TT: Honestly, as much as I appreciate the concern, it was a pretty sad attempt at some grade-school-level bullying. It really isn't anything I can't handle. If you hadn't brought it up I would have already forgotten about it.

TT: Also stop spying on me.

GG: not him dummy :P

GG: the girl!!

TT: What girl?

GG: the girl that walked up next to you

all stoic and stuff! did you get her name?

TT: What? No, we didn't speak a word to each other.

GG: she seemed really pretty!

TT: "Seemed." How does one "Seem" to be attractive? It was my understanding that that is something that exists mostly in a subjective binary state. Either you thought she was hot or you didn't. Am I wrong?

TT: Why? Are you planning on hitting on her?

GG: and get between those sparks? no way!

TT:

TT:

TT: Jade, you can't possibly be implying what I think you are. She didn't even seem to notice that I was there.

TT: Besides, you would make a poor and counterproductive wing man.

GG: that isnt a denial that you thought she was pretty! ;D

TT: Goodbye, Jade.

Class is boring. Well, the subject is fascinating, but this professor is wildly uninteresting. Either that or psychology is a lot less entertaining than you thought when diagnosing your friends with obscure psychiatric conditions when you were ten years old. Who are you kidding, that's still just as fun as it was back then.

Afterward, you make a visit to the library. There's a certain book you've been making your way through, The Dunwich Horror. You hadn't actually started reading anything in the realm of the Cthulu mythos until very recently.

You sit down at a table and take your book out of your heavy black bag. It's then that a familiar face walks into the library. It's that girl. You roll your eyes at just the memory of Jade's messages to you before noticing that she is walking directly towards your table.

KANAYA: Is He Actually Any Good

ROSE: Hello to you too.

ROSE: If you meant as a writer, I haven't decided my opinion there yet.

ROSE: However, if you meant as a person, I'm afraid to say absolutely not.

ROSE: I feel quite bad for his cat.

KANAYA: I Am Afraid To Ask Why

ROSE: You can google it on your own time... What was your name?

KANAYA: Kanaya Maryam

She sits down. She tucks her dress under herself in a way that comes off very prim and proper. She holds her own hand under the table. You can't quite get a read on this woman. First, she comes in and out of view like a force of nature, now she looks like she could start shaking at any moment.

ROSE: Rose.

KANAYA: Sorry To Intrude On Your Reading

KANAYA: I Merely Wished To Initiate A Point Of Contact So That You Knew Who I Was

KANAYA: And If You Were Interested I Could Also Find Out Who You Are

KANAYA: Become Acquainted With Each Other

KANAYA: Because I Find You Interesting

This can't possibly be what you think it is. Is she

really... hitting on you? Making a pass? It's too obtusely phrased for you to really get a read on it. Kanaya's face is flushed and her eyes are scanning just about everything in the room other than yourself.

ROSE: I suppose I can allow that.

ROSE: What is it that you would like to know?

KANAYA: What Is Your Major

ROSE: That's a rather overdone question, Kanaya Maryam.

KANAYA: Forgive Me Im Just Getting Started

You steeple your fingers dramatically.

ROSE: I seek to comprehend the unknowable. To unmoor that which is impossible to see from its inky depths and bring it into the light. Comprehending horrors beyond the understanding of most.

ROSE: I am a-

KANAYA: A Witch

ROSE: psychologist.

You stifle a laugh. It comes out as a short snort.

ROSE: In training at least.

KANAYA: Oh

KANAYA: Well That Makes More Sense I Guess

KANAYA: Maybe I Will Enlist Your Services Some Day Down The Line

ROSE: You are aware magic isn't real,

correct?

KANAYA: Im Coming Around To The Idea

You fail to stifle a giggle this time. You hope it doesn't come off as too girlish, you would hate to undo this intimidating air you have created for yourself. Although, if you're right about this woman attempting to flirt with you, perhaps coming off as cold and imposing isn't the best option in this situation like it is in all others.

ROSE: What about you? What do you do?

KANAYA: Fashion Design

KANAYA: This Dress Is Actually A Project Of Mine

KANAYA: I Am Trying To Make Something That I Want To Wear Rather Than Something For Someone Else

KANAYA: Since Im Turning It In For An Assignment I Guess I May Have Failed That Goal Implicitly

ROSE: As long as you want to wear it I would assume that counts as a success.

ROSE: It suits you. Red is a good color on you.

KANAYA: Thank You

ROSE: That does explain the wardrobe change.

ROSE: I had assumed maybe you had some identity-based meltdown in the middle of your first class.

KANAYA: On Second Thought

KANAYA: Maybe I Will Not Hire You As A Therapist

KANAYA: That Isnt A Very Good Guess No

Offense

ROSE: That's why I'm here and not already practicing.

ROSE: I've been trying to think of where I've seen you before this morning.

ROSE: I see you hanging with that one girl...

ROSE: What is her name? Vriska?

KANAYA: Yes

KANAYA: Her

ROSE: "Her" and her own group.

KANAYA: You Know Vriska

ROSE: I know of her.

ROSE: We share some classes.

KANAYA: Thats Surprising

KANAYA: She Doesnt Strike Me As Someone Who Would Seek Out Psychiatry As A Profession

ROSE: My guess is that she took on some of those classes to better verbally destroy her conversational victims.

KANAYA: Is That Not Why You Do It

ROSE: On the record, no.

You remember your friend and brother Dave making a very similar comment.

KANAYA: You Actually Remembered One Of My Friends Names

KANAYA: Which Must Mean That You Are Not As Heartless As I Thought

KANAYA: Imagine My Disappointment

ROSE: Oh dear, I haven't ruined this by being too considerate and charming, have I?

ROSE: I will do my best to remedy this at once.

KANAYA: Not At All

KANAYA: Actually

Kanaya hands you a small piece of paper marked with green ink.

KANAYA: This Is My Phone Number

ROSE: I see that.

ROSE: Do you have Pesterchum?

KANAYA: Um No But

ROSE: Discord?

KANAYA: Oh Actually Yes I Do

She takes the note back, takes a pen out of her pocket, and with a click writes some additional information before returning it.

ROSE: I am pretty bad with names.

ROSE: It's not from a lack of trying, you just seem to know a lot of people.

KANAYA: You Seem Not To

ROSE: Excuse me?

You quirk an eyebrow. Kanaya seems not to have noticed her social faux pas.

KANAYA: Oh I Was Just Commenting On The Fact That You And Your Group Seems To Only Consist Of Three Other People

This bitch.

ROSE: Is that right?

KANAYA: Oh Not That There Is Anything Wrong With That

KANAYA: Honestly Sometimes I Wish I Had Fewer Friends

KANAYA: Mine Can Be A Bit Much

ROSE: And that's why you lowered yourself to befriending me? You think my loser friends and I have, what? A comfy vibe to us?

KANAYA: No I Just Mean

KANAYA: A Lot Of My Friends Are Not Actually Very Good

ROSE: Yes, it's about time you have risen above all your bad and terrible friends and socially ostracize yourself by communicating with me. Good plan.

Kanaya shrinks back into her chair. It seems as though she can dish out the heat but has a much harder time taking it. You know her type. You aren't just going to let this girl fuck with you like this. You are more than familiar with this type of game and she's a fool to think you can't keep up. You were trained by the best.

You put your book in your bag and get up out of your seat to leave. Your callout seems to have frozen Kanaya to the point she can't muster up a retort. You win this round. Her move.

This campus, with its far-too-many rooms, has a nice cafeteria. This is usually the time that you reconvene with your friends. You scan the crowds of people gathered with their packed meals and doordash orders to find that your friends are sitting with a large

group of other people. Fairly unusual for your lot. You try to recall if they have mentioned meeting anyone new recently... You see Vriska's among them. It's impossible to ignore the sting of Kanaya's barbs in this moment.

You elect to leave rather than sit alone.

The air outside is humid. The rain died down, but the grass is still wet and the earth still smells of petrichor. You sit at the top of a hill, back against a tree, and unpack a lunch you made yourself this morning.

She's there. Doesn't this girl know when to let up?

KANAYA: Hello Rose

Rubbing salt in the wound, she sits next to you. Kanaya holds her legs. She's disregarded the fact that the wet grass will likely stain the project that she is currently wearing.

KANAYA: I Think We Got Off On The Wrong Foot

KANAYA: Do You Mind If I Sit Here

You keep eating.

KANAYA: Im Sorry If I Struck A Nerve

KANAYA: I Didnt Mean To Offend

KANAYA: I Find You To Be Quite Admirable

KANAYA: Your Friends Are Good To You And Kind

KANAYA: I May Not Understand Them All But You Dont Find Yourself Stuck To People Who

Dont Treat You With Respect

ROSE: Is that how you would characterize your friendships?

KANAYA: Not All Of Them

KANAYA: And They Certainly Dont Have Bad Intentions

KANAYA: Hurt People Have A Tendency To Find Each Other

KANAYA: And Often Times It Comes With Instability

KANAYA: And That Can Lead To Hurt

ROSE: I think you mistake the tight-knit nature of me and my friends for stability. We all have our problems, even if a couple of them won't admit it.

ROSE: We all just care about each other.

ROSE: No matter what we have going on in our personal lives, we do our best to be good to each other. Sometimes we fail, but that's okay.

KANAYA: Then I Was Right

KANAYA: You Are A Strong Person Rose

Kanaya hangs her head, holding it in her arms. She's practically in the fetal position. It's funny how someone so tall and imposing can make themselves look so small.

ROSE: I'm not one to debate morality. I fear I struggle to know how good I am from time to time.

KANAYA: Me Too

ROSE: In the end, I think it's useless to

judge yourself so harshly. Doubting yourself so endlessly can get in the way of doing some things that are very important. Sometimes it isn't what's most kind or patient that's important.

ROSE: Or maybe I'm just impulsive and led by my emotions.

KANAYA: That Doesnt Seem Right

KANAYA: Well Impulsive Yes But You Are Quite Bright

ROSE: You sure seem to think you know me pretty well.

KANAYA: Im A Good Judge Of Character

ROSE: She said after complaining about how terrible her friends make her feel.

KANAYA: They Arent All Bad I Think I Was Just Feeling Angsty

ROSE: I wouldn't know what that's like.

Kanaya picks her head up and looks at you. She puts her hand on the grass and it's inches from yours. She doesn't seem to notice, she's just looking at you.

ROSE: You're a fashion design student, you know your proportions, right?

KANAYA: What

ROSE: If I wanted to knit you something.

ROSE: I have a mental picture of you in a trashy hand-knit sweater.

KANAYA: I Never Would Have Imagined

ROSE: Like I said, you don't actually know me very well.

KANAYA: I Would Like To Change That
KANAYA: If You Would Allow It.

ROSE: ...

ROSE: I suppose I could allow that.

ROSE: I'm not terribly practiced when it
comes to meeting new people these days.

ROSE: Think you can handle me being a
little amateurish?

KANAYA: I Wouldn't Exactly Call Myself An
Expert In That Field

KANAYA: Meeting People Can Be Hard

KANAYA: Letting People In Can Be Harder

KANAYA: Its So Hard Rose

KANAYA: But Yes I Can Handle You

Kanya probably didn't mean for that statement to
hit as hard as it did.

ROSE: Kanaya, how do you want to be
remembered?

KANAYA: Thats An Odd Question

KANAYA: Im Not Sure

KANAYA: What About You

ROSE: I asked you. This is how getting to
know each other works.

KANAYA: Alright Well

KANAYA: Ignoring The Fact That Being
Remembered Isnt Something Terribly
Important To Me In The First Place

KANAYA: I Think You May Make Fun Of My
Answer

KANAYA: Someone Who Stood Up To The Worst
Of The World

KANAYA: Someone Who Remained By The Side Of
Those She Cared About And Made The World
Into Something She Wanted To Live In

KANAYA:

KANAYA: So

KANAYA: Not Quite As I Am

You leave your last class early. It has been a less-
than-excellent week, to say the least, and you just need
to get some space. Studying is too much. People are too
much. You slide down against the wall of this thankfully
empty hallway. You aren't used to losing your cool like
this. You almost start to choke out a sob. You simply
can't have that, so you decide to instead focus your
energy elsewhere. You need to walk.

Headed towards nowhere in particular, you hear
something. Normally it is not so easy to distract Rose
Lalonde from stewing in her melancholic solitude, but
the noise is just unsettling enough that it piques your
curiosity. A jostle from the janitor's closet, door closed.
Joined by the sound of something tearing. It's a bit
grotesque, leading you away from the obvious
conclusion that it is just some people making out in
there. Or, possibly, you just really want to find
something in there to draw you. Anything to pull you
out of your own head. You open the door.

What you see is- well you don't see much. It's dark.
You see who you recognize as Kanaya, on her knees,
hunched over... something. Upon hearing the door
open Kanaya's head jerks up to look at you. Two pieces
of information hit you quickly. The object that she is
hunched over is the unmoving body of that Random
Douchebag and Kanaya's chin is dripping with blood.

ROSE: RD!?

KANAYA: What

You need to catch yourself. This is a horrifying scene you have just happened upon and that was an incredibly stupid thing to say. You mentally readjust. Quickly you enter the closet and shut the door behind you. There is a switch to your left, and when you flip it a singular dangling lightbulb dimly lights the bloody girl before you. The light hits her from above so her hair covers a lot of her facial features. You can just barely make out her eyes.

She's looking at you. Intense, intimidating, but deeply frightened. You'd be tempted to call it a "deer in the headlights" look if it weren't for the fact that she was just hunched over a person looking like a coyote enjoying some roadkill. Speaking of-

KANAYA: I Can Explain

ROSE: You would say that, wouldn't you?

ROSE: A person who just got caught murdering someone would have lots to explain to a witness of said murder.

ROSE: Witness/next victim in line.

KANAYA: Oh Yes That

KANAYA: Well

KANAYA: I Can Understand Why You Would Fear For Your Life In This Situation

KANAYA: Although I Would Be Confused Why A Girl Facing Mortal Danger Would Run Towards Said Danger And Close The Door Behind Her

ROSE: ...

KANAYA: Youre Covering For Me

KANAYA: Why

ROSE: I haven't decided if I'm covering for you yet.

ROSE: I don't know if you had a good reason or not. That will probably decide whether or not I alert someone to what you are doing.

KANAYA: Oh

ROSE: Why?

KANAYA: Um

ROSE: I hope that this poor young man was not sentenced to death merely for the crime of calling me a slur specifically.

ROSE: Truly, this is the future liberals want.

KANAYA: Sorry What

ROSE: It was a joke. Answer the question, now.

KANAYA: I Knew That Was A Joke I Was Confused About The Part Before That

KANAYA: No I Didn't Kill Him Because He Called You A Slur Although It Surely Didn't Help His Case

ROSE: Oh, well that's good I suppose.

ROSE: For a moment I suspected this was some sort of gesture.

KANAYA: I Thought You Didn't Want That To Be The Reason

ROSE: Shush. You are avoiding the question. Why kill him?

KANAYA: Assault

ROSE: This is quite a bit beyond assault, Kanaya.

KANAYA: He Committed Assault

KANAYA: A Plethora Of Kinds A Plethora Of Times

KANAYA: And He Was Getting Away With It

KANAYA: He Was Going To Keep Getting Away With It

KANAYA: People With Enough Social Capital Here Do What They Want And Dont Stop Until They Have Had Their Fill No Matter How Many People They Hurt

KANAYA: I Heard Too Many Stories From His Victims And I Got Angry

KANAYA: They Dont Have Anything To Worry About Now

ROSE: A crime of passion then. You make it sound so noble.

ROSE: There's an obvious follow-up question I'm a little afraid to ask.

Kanaya has the gall to lick her lips in this moment, and then upon realizing what she's done, has the gall to bashfully look to her right and blush. You want to scream in that moment. Why was she eating him?

ROSE: Who's your next mark? Eridan?

KANAYA: If His Egg Doesnt Crack Soon Possibly

You chuckle. This is so fucked up, you can't believe you laughed just now. At a time like this, Lalonde?

The door creeks open. Kanaya's eyes go wide. She looks down at the mess behind her. It's an instant of absolute instinct. You push yourself backward as hard as you can. Someone must have heard you. Someone is

trying to open the door. You need a plan. You only give yourself time for two breaths. You whisper.

ROSE: (Can you dispose of it?)

She nods.

In one swift motion you open the door, twist yourself out the door, and shut the door behind you. Before you stands one of your teachers. You wince. This is one of the few teachers you actually like right now, so this is going to hurt to do.

ROSE: Excuse me, is there something you need in this closet?

TEACHER: Rose? You shouldn't be-

ROSE: I don't know why you're telling me where I should or should not be. Don't you have a class to be teaching?

ROSE: Or is your highest priority right now finding out the exact business of one student out of class? This isn't high school, I am allowed to be out of class you know.

ROSE: What makes you so invested in the personal goings-on of one of your students? It's a little creepy, in my opinion.

ROSE: If you simply must know I was just in the middle of a meltdown.

The lie isn't terribly far-fetched. That's probably what would have been true had she not found Kanaya there. Funny weird Kanaya, vigilante murderer. She can't seem to get it. Is this going to be traumatizing for

her to recall later? All that her mind can land on now is she needs to get her out of trouble.

ROSE: The stresses of school life have simply become too much for me.

ROSE: All my academic life has led to this moment and for what? Burning out on a subject I decided I was going to get into when pressured to decide what I wanted to do for the rest of my life at the ripe old age of 13?

ROSE: To take something that was once a passion of mine and be badgered with assignments and papers so much that I have no time to have a social life, or to make friends.

ROSE: The few friends I do have I feel distant with and struggle to understand.

ROSE: Is it possible that after taking your class I understand my fellow man even less than I did before?

ROSE: I have two unfinished papers that I need to turn in at midnight tonight for your class and three other papers from three other classes not much later and this is all I have to show for it. Complete and total burnout.

ROSE: Honestly, I can't tell if I hate the subject now or if I never truly cared for it in the first place!

Your words come out intense and accusatory. It's all just to help your new girlcrush get out of a bind but...

You might accidentally be hitting something. Your tone shifts towards the sincere as your focus shifts from your teacher (currently speechless) to the middle distance.

ROSE: I think I...

ROSE: I want to be a writer.

ROSE: Growing up there was all this pressure from my mother to be a professional and pursue a career with some real money behind it...

ROSE: Well, no, she didn't. She responded very enthusiastically when I mentioned my creative writing for the first time, but she did it in a manner that made it very clear she thought I was wasting my time and should abandon the arts entirely. I kept playing the violin but... No. I've always wanted to be a writer.

TEACHER:

TEACHER:

TEACHER: Well, we have a creative writing course.

ROSE: Do you think we could change my major? It isn't too late, is it?

TEACHER: Not at all. On the condition that you don't insult me for the rest of the day. Please.

Rose looks over her shoulder at the janitor's closet.

ROSE: Could we possibly go do that now?

ROSE: I mean like right this second.
ROSE: If you have the time of course.

You are led by this poor, poor man to an office with a computer where you can have your classes changed. Behind you, Kanaya Maryam is... handling things. Somehow. There's a million things you wish you could have told her to do to make sure someone else doesn't just barge in.

Once the end of the day rolls around you make your way back to the janitor's closet. You knock. The door opens and it's Kanaya.

ROSE: You're still here?

KANAYA: I Was Just About To Leave

ROSE: I see you cleaned up.

KANAYA: It Helps That The Room Is Full Of Cleaning Supplies

KANAYA: I Wanted To Apologize

KANAYA: Ive Never Been Caught Before And I Assume Seeing Something Like That When You Arent Prepared Could Be

KANAYA: Decently Traumatizing

ROSE: Well that's one suspicion confirmed.

KANAYA: What

ROSE: You've done this before.

KANAYA:

KANAYA: Yes

KANAYA: I Would Understand If You No Longer Wish To Speak With Me

KANAYA: Although I Would Be Sad It Would Be A Small Price To Pay For Not Being Turned

In To The Police

ROSE: As they say,

ROSE: Fuck the po-lice.

KANAYA: !

ROSE: You are going to get caught if you continue as you're doing. This was sloppy. You need a better method. A consistent method.

KANAYA: What Would You Have Me Do

ROSE: I have a plan. One I could share with you.

ROSE: Over dinner, perhaps?

KANAYA: This Wouldnt Happen To Be What I Think It Is Would It

KANAYA: That Would Be Absurd

ROSE: Of course not. Do You Like Greek food?

KANAYA: Im Not Hungry But Later Tonight I Could Definitely Go For That

ROSE: Well then.

ROSE: It's A Date.

Fin



[t ghostedglitch](#)

DUALITY'S
DOWNFALL



[t deepintheocean](#)



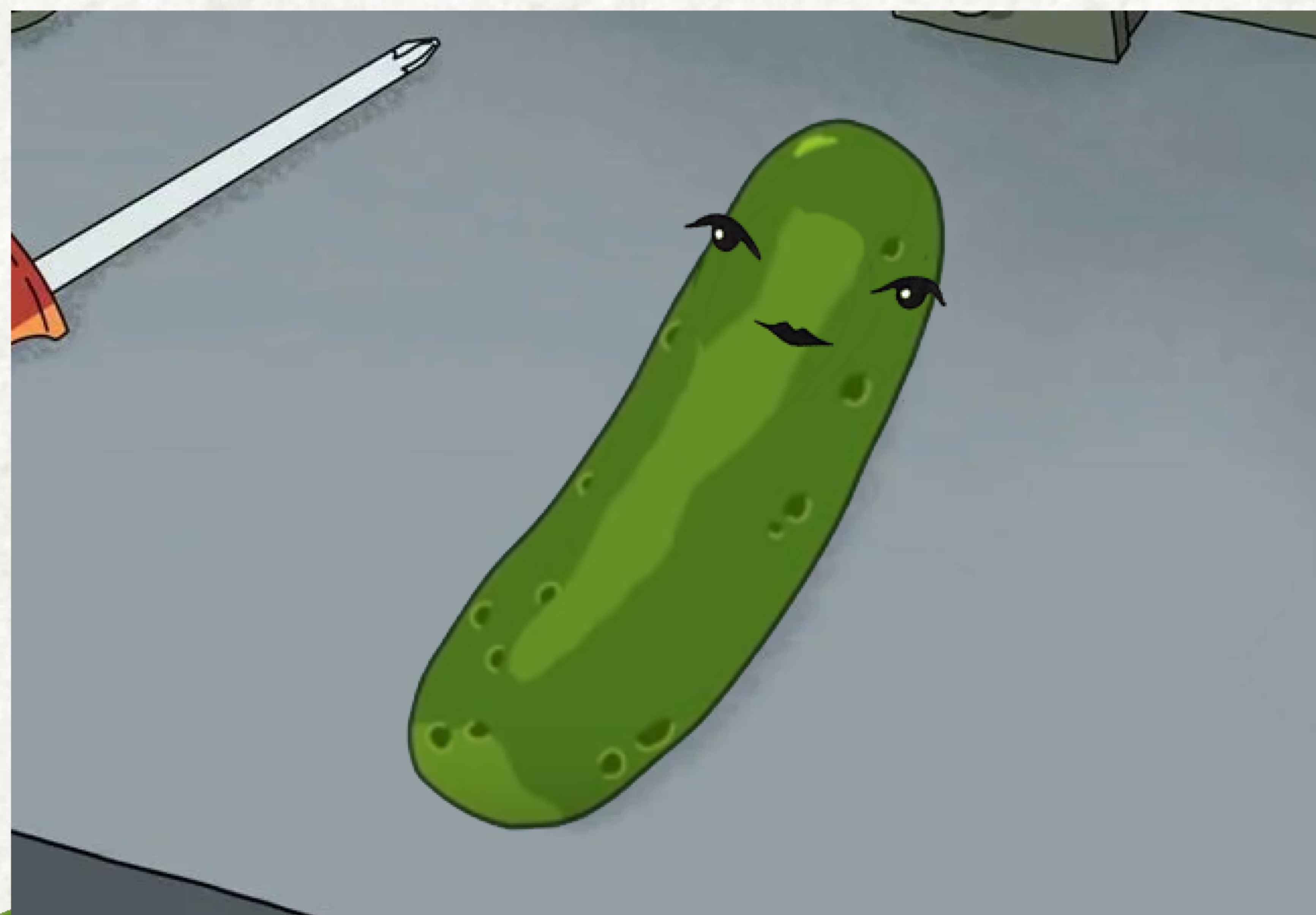
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 Kartoffels4lat



"In a Pickle"

by EtchJetty

ROSE: I'm a pickle now, Dave.

DAVE: so i can see

DAVE: but what are you going to do about kanaya

ROSE: Who?

DAVE: kanaya

DAVE: you have a date with her tonight

DAVE: the one i asked you about and you said you were quote
the most prepared anyone has ever been

ROSE: Oh! Yes.

ROSE: That Kanaya.

ROSE: We will simply have to cancel.

ROSE: Clearly I am not in a state to be dated.

DAVE: rose are you for fucking real

DAVE: you spent the last two weeks pacing around the house
trying to figure out how to impress her and now you turned
yourself into a pickle

ROSE: I mean, would you look at me and not cancel the date?

DAVE: ill give you that

DAVE: but you havent called to cancel

ROSE: I was hoping you could do that.

DAVE: im not gonna fucking cancel on the girl you clearly like

ROSE: Who said I liked her?

DAVE: you

DAVE: constantly

DAVE: for weeks

ROSE: ...

ROSE: Dave, I can't do this. I'm self destructing.

ROSE: She shouldn't date me. She's too good for me.

ROSE: Look at me, Dave.

DAVE: i have done nothing but look at you

ROSE: I'm a total wreck. I'm a scientist with nothing to her name. I'm an author with only a few trainwreck manuscripts. I'm a knitter who's only crocheted.

ROSE: I'm a fraud.

ROSE: For Kanaya's own good, please call her and cancel the date.

DAVE: that is

DAVE: so much bullshit

DAVE: that i dont even know where to begin

DAVE: for one thing you can play the violin like nobody i know

DAVE: youre consistently funny

DAVE: kanaya is stupid lucky to be able to date you

KANAYA: Im What Now

ROSE: (Oh, fuck.)

KANAYA: Sorry I Couldnt Help But Notice You Were In The Garage

KANAYA: Talking To A Pickle

KANAYA: Youre Dave Right

KANAYA: Rose Has Told Me A Lot About You

DAVE: rose has told me a lot about you too

DAVE: isnt that right rose

ROSE: (Shh!)

KANAYA: What Was That

KANAYA: Why Is That Pickle Sweating

KANAYA: And Have The Face Of The Woman I Wanted To Take To Dinner

ROSE: ...

ROSE: Hi, Kanaya! Wowie, I certainly got myself into a bit of a pickle today.

KANAYA: ...

KANAYA: You Are Lucky That I Find You Hilarious

KANAYA: And That I Ate Before I Got Here

ROSE: (Oof.)

KANAYA: Can You Turn Yourself Back

KANAYA: Because While Your Face Is Beautiful

KANAYA: I Only Accept Pickles As Attractive When Attached To Women And Not The Other Way Around

ROSE: (This is the worst start to a first date I think I've ever had.)

DAVE: (and the only first date youve ever had)

DAVE: wheres the unpickling serum

ROSE: In the cabinet labelled "HRT."

ROSE: Just inject me and...

KANAYA: Um

KANAYA: I Was Hoping To See This Sight But

KANAYA: Later Tonight

KANAYA: Without You Being Covered In Pickle Juice

DAVE: i should

DAVE: go

DAVE: the less i can hear about roses pickle the happier of a man i think i will be

DAVE: you two have fun

ROSE: ...

ROSE: You really... wanted to see me?

ROSE: I'm such a fuckup that I turned myself into a pickle rather than face the fact that I have no idea how to talk to a woman I'm interested in.

KANAYA: But You Are Interested In Me

ROSE: You could do so much better.

KANAYA: Ive Seen A Lot Of Naked Women

KANAYA: Strangely

KANAYA: Even With The Pickle Juice

KANAYA: And The Fact That We Are In Your Science Garage

KANAYA: You Are Still By Far The Most Beautiful I Have Seen

ROSE: ...

ROSE: I'm so sorry for ruining this date.

KANAYA: Ruining

KANAYA: Who Said It Was Ruined

KANAYA: Youre Not In A Pickle Anymore Are You

ROSE: Well, no, but I assumed...

KANAYA: Assume Nothing

KANAYA: But That I Am Deeply Intrigued By You

KANAYA: And Have Been Since We First Began Communicating

KANAYA: And If I Must Be Honest With Myself

KANAYA: The Fact That You Turned Yourself Into A Pickle

KANAYA: Is The Funniest Shit I Have Ever Seen

ROSE: Well, thanks.

ROSE: I'm glad my mental breakdowns can be a source of entertainment for you.

KANAYA: So

KANAYA: Do You Need Some Time

ROSE: Just a shower and then I think we'll be good.

KANAYA: Ill Order Takeout

ROSE: You can order more or less anything that doesn't have pickles in it.

ROSE: Right now, for some reason, I want anything but that.

KANAYA: I Couldnt Imagine Why

KANAYA: Go Get Clean You Silly Brilliant Idiot

KANAYA: See You After Your Shower

ROSE: See you, Kanaya.

ROSE: And thanks.

KANAYA: !!!

KANAYA: Thank You

KANAYA: I Never Thought That Being Kissed By A Girl Covered In Pickle Juice Would

KANAYA: Now That Im Thinking About It The Exciting Factor There Was Probably The Fact That The Girl Was Rose Lalonde And Not The Pickle Juice

KANAYA: Please Go Get Changed Before I Further Embarrass Myself

ROSE: Kanaya, I turned myself into a pickle.

ROSE: And that was how tonight started.

ROSE: Okay, okay! Sheesh.

ROSE: This is going to be a good night.

KANAYA: That It Will

KANAYA: That It Will

...

DAVE: why does the WHOLE HOUSE smell like pickles

Fin



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INK

by Funk McLovin

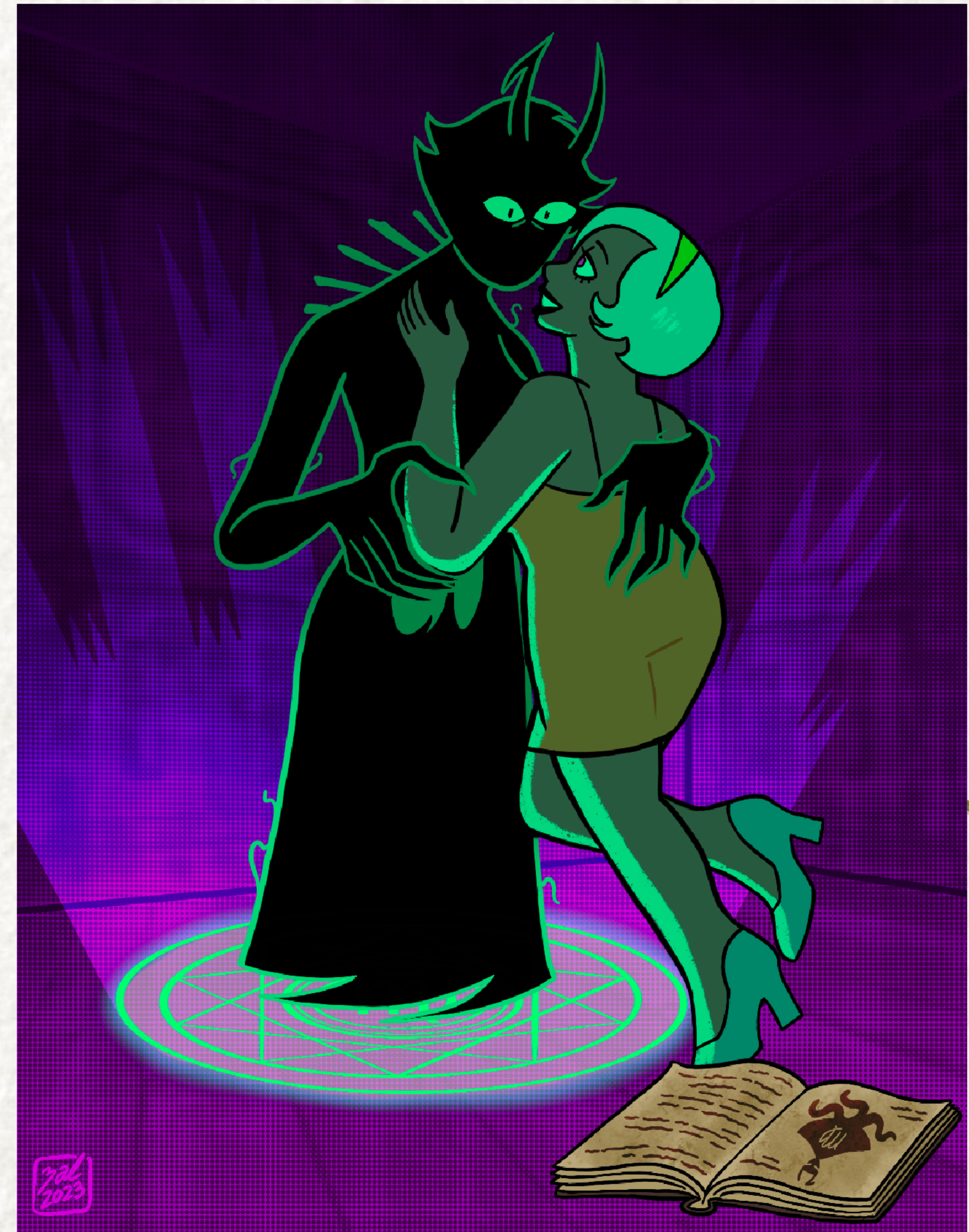
"Who..." the voice seemed to come from beneath the floorboards, each syllable reverberating within the room as it shook, the dim lights flickering on Rose's orange dress.

"I beseech thee of the inky abyss to enter my realm," Rose stammered the incantation as inky black shadows began to dance on the walls with no apparent source. The fire from the candles flared up, giving off the scent of a struck match, singing Rose's nostrils.

"Who dares...?" the voice continued to growl. It sounded angry, frustrated no doubt at being dragged into the mortal world from parts unknown. The blackened shadows peeled themselves from the walls and swirled in the center of the circle like a fluid, coalescing into a sphere hovering above Rose's clumsy summoning sigil. Rose felt a jolt of excitement. It was working.

"I beseech thee of the inky abyss to enter my-
Augh!" Rose fell back as the floor rocked, unmoored from gravity, her books and her shelves beginning to float upward, suspended now off the ground, the very air had become like water. Everything floated, Rose's body felt weightless. Rose scrambled, reaching for books before they could fall off the shelves, her paper-bound babies making her forget her present ritual until a booming voice broke the surreal silence.

"Who dares disturb my respite?" the growling, demanding voice was clear and sharp now, feminine



[t zal-cryptid](#)

and monstrous but more importantly... Livid. The room's floating suddenly halted, Rose's bookcase and trinkets thudding to the ground with a deafening impact of paper, wood, and glass. Eerie silence followed. When Rose at last mustered the courage to peek, what she saw stopped every thought dead in its tracks, her jaw unhinged.

In the center of the circle was a mass of dark blackness with viridian highlights, a shimmering pool of green ink. The mass was shaped vaguely like a human, taking form as time passed as if the ink was sculpting itself into shape, a clearer physique emerging as Rose watched with wide eyes. First, delicate fingers separated from its arms, then eyes sank into its head, then horns jutted from its temples, the being making a noise of seeming relief; finally having a body with which to articulate in this new reality. Rose's heart hammered, the only sound in the dim room other than the burbling of this eldritch being's very body.

"Answer me, wretch," the demon spoke, pointing a newly-formed black finger, tipped with a long and razor-sharp nail. "What say you, the architect of my kidnapping? Fool as you are, you have failed to bind me to your will, so speak afore I slash the soft of your throat. Speak! Gasp your final words, you mundane worm!"

Rose was speechless for a moment more, her eyes crossed as she stared at the finger pointing right at her. Surely this human was too alarmed to respond, surely terror was now spreading through her veins like ice. Slowly, she stood as if in a trance, arms stretching outward, one hand pressing against the chest of the alien thing she had summoned with delicate reverence. The newborn eyes of the ink-beast widened in surprise as she held the mortal who leaned against her. The

newborn eyes of the ink-beast widened in surprise as she held the mortal who leaned against her. The human felt soft.

"Hiiiiiii," said the mortal, a blush darkening the skin of her cheekbones, her voice gentle and admiring, as sweet and intoxicating as honey wine. "You're very pretty."

The ink-shape's bravado evaporated like a deflating balloon, her demanding and violent tone replaced by a shockingly meek mumble, taken aback by the woman leaning on her who smelled of lavender and tea tree shampoo.

"Oh, um," the shape made a burble somewhat similar to the clearing of a throat. "You really think so?"

Rose's eyes were drawn to the miasma of the ink-shape's body, its flowing figure defying sight, as if Rose's eyes were playing tricks on her, a thousand tiny optical illusions coalescing atom-like into a whole figure. Rose could get lost in looking for years like a beautiful dream. Sensing that she was being stared at, the figure introduced herself to attempt to steer the conversation with this mortal back into a place it understood.

"I am the Mistress of Space, the unpronounceable shadow, the flicker in every maddened author's candle, to you I am dream-shaper, madness-weaver, insaniam factorem," she paused for effect, watching with her ephemeral eyes the small human agog before her. Yes, this was more appropriate. The blonde woman's awestruck visage was something the being was more used to. "To you, I am Kanaya Maryam. Original sin of those who pine for escape."

"Wooooow," the human drew out the syllable. Kanaya again deflated as it realized the blonde human's awe was not of terror but of admiration. "You're better than I ever dreamed, Miss Maryam. I'm Rose, your humble acolyte. Surely you have heard my prayers?"

The ink shape had finally solidified, its skin warming to the mundane realm she had been dragged into by this "Rose" girl. Kanaya's new eyes swept the room, looking down at her feet.

"I hear the prayers of all mad world-weavers," Kanaya said, taking a hesitant step from the summoning circle. "You are but a droplet of water in the eternal ocean of-" Kanaya paused. Her voice gained an impatient tone. "Excuse me, but did you even bother to seal this summoning ring, girl?" Kanaya's foot scuffed the white chalk, smearing Rose's meticulously-made ring. "Fool as you are, you have failed to contain me. How will you stop me from roaming free in this realm?" Kanaya placed inky hands on pine-black hips, cocking her head at Rose. "What if I rampaged your puny reality? What would you do then?"

"My goal was not to bind you," Rose said mildly, ignoring the implicit threat of rampage. As Kanaya moved about the room in her pine-colored body, she stretched her arms. Her skin shifted and shimmered like a poor videotape recording and Rose felt like she should not stare for long, no matter how good it felt. Kanaya's scent was unspeakable, both sweet and bitter at once and impossibly "green," somehow. Rose's very senses mixed, she could hear ink flowing in her ears and taste the iron of a pen-tip.

"Fine. Then what is your goal, little flower?" asked Kanaya at last when Rose's awed silence stretched too thin for patience. "Most summon me for inspiration like

I am some cheap muse. Some summon me for power. Most summon me in the delusion that I can drag their little written worlds into living reality. You, however, appear to have summoned me on a whim." Kanaya glared through Rose, seeming to understand something- Clairvoyance, perhaps? Mind-reading? Rose got the strong sense of her privacy degrading and she was alarmed to find she did not feel violated.

"Ah," said Kanaya, pacing toward Rose. Was Kanaya growing in height? Had she always dwarfed the bookcase? She loomed over Rose with a grin that spread past what should have been her cheekbones. "The little flower is a writer," Kanaya said.

"How did you know?" asked Rose, breathless as if Kanaya had just shown off an impressive parlor trick.

"It is my nature to know," Kanaya replied simply. "So you do wish for inspiration? Be wary, little human, my insight has driven greater pensmiths mad with-"

"It's not inspiration," Rose corrected quickly. She approached Kanaya again, grasping the figure's hand. It was without heat or cold, a void weight in her palm, softer than flesh. Kanaya's glowing eyes seemed to envelop Rose's sight the longer the human stared, but Rose didn't look away, biting her lip, mustering the courage to state the fact that had been etched into her heart for time immemorial. She breathed and spoke.

"I love you."

The hand Rose held shuddered, Kanaya's body shaking. Was it disgust? Shock? Kanaya's mundane face betrayed nothing but Rose thought she saw those eyes widen. Kanaya drew Rose closer, stating one soft syllable.

"Why?"

"I've never loved a worldly man," Rose said quietly. "Though women are lovely, none situate into my life correctly. Heartbreak plagues me and all who I call dear, you see..." Rose looked away, Kanaya's eyes making Rose dizzy. Everything about this ethereal thing was dizzying and Rose could feel the edges of her mind fraying, but she pressed on.

Kanaya watched as Rose spoke, the room's window darkening, the autumn breeze flowing in though Rose's windows were closed. The room's walls seemed less solid now, their features shifting when Rose looked away from them. Kanaya's being had spread from just her inky body to the inside of Rose's summoning room.

"I have but one love," Rose said, sweeping one hand over the bookshelves. On them were books, all uniformly dusty and worn, each one well-loved. Many bore Rose's own name. The bookshelves holding the books shifted in Rose's peripheral vision, only holding still when she looked directly at them. "My love is literature, Kanaya."

Kanaya's eyes were widening now, her body growing to fill the space of the room, Rose's windows were gone and darkness was quickly swallowing the room whole but Rose wasn't afraid. This was what she wanted. Kanaya's glowing eyes listened impassively as Rose spoke on, forcing her frightened voice to be steady.

"Literature is not a man nor a woman I can hold to my breast, not a thing to sate my needs and my wants and my desires, but-" Rose trailed off as she realized that the only light remaining in the room- In her world- were Kanaya's glowing beacon-eyes. "-but you are!"

Rose's declaration echoed within the room and the human realized she was floating. In the gaps of her consciousness, the room had slipped away unnoticed, leaving only a black void with jade-green highlights. Kanaya's form had grown outward, her eyes innumerable and blinding, boring into Rose's very being. Rose didn't know if she could move her arms and legs or if she had arms and legs with which to move at all.

"Are you not afraid?" Kanaya's voice permeated Rose. She could taste and see and smell the words themselves, etched into her very being before being spoken.

"I'm in love," Rose replied.

The mass of black eldritch mystery balked at the mortal's answer and in Rose's addled, maddened mind, she could have sworn a jade-green blush glowed on Kanaya's cheeks before fading like the flash from a camera.

Kanaya's hand reached out, dripping black ink, the size now of an automobile, closing tight around Rose, casting her into complete blackness. Rose opened her mouth to scream but ink, bitter and sour flowed into her mouth. When she sucked in a breath, the sharp sting of her sinuses opening greeted her and muffled shouts turned to nothingness as the ink flowed into her body and solidified, encasing her in it like she was being written down to the page.

Then, she woke.

She sputtered, coughing, blinking to her senses on the wood floor of her modest library. A dream?

Rose gripped her throat, breath hitching. She coughed and spat, her throat dislodging a mass of ink, staining the hardwood beneath her. Not a dream.

Woosily, she stood, stumbling into her bathroom to retch more ink from her lungs and stomach, the sink basin blackened, her pale parchment-like skin even more discolored than usual. She felt sick. Poisoned, even. Ink was not a suitable beverage, particularly in the quantities she'd swallowed. Was she going to get ill from this?

She spat the last of the ink out, wiping her mouth and gazing into the mirror. She touched her lips, noticing they had been stained an inky black. She rubbed with a finger, then a towel, but the ink didn't come off her parted mouth. Were stained lips the only memento she would get from her otherworldly paramour? Perhaps that was enough.

She walked back into the library, but in opening the door, she halted. On her arm, in swirling green ink, she saw words, each letter carefully written, each word capitalized. The words made her blackened lips curl into a sentimental smile.

"See You Soon."

FIN





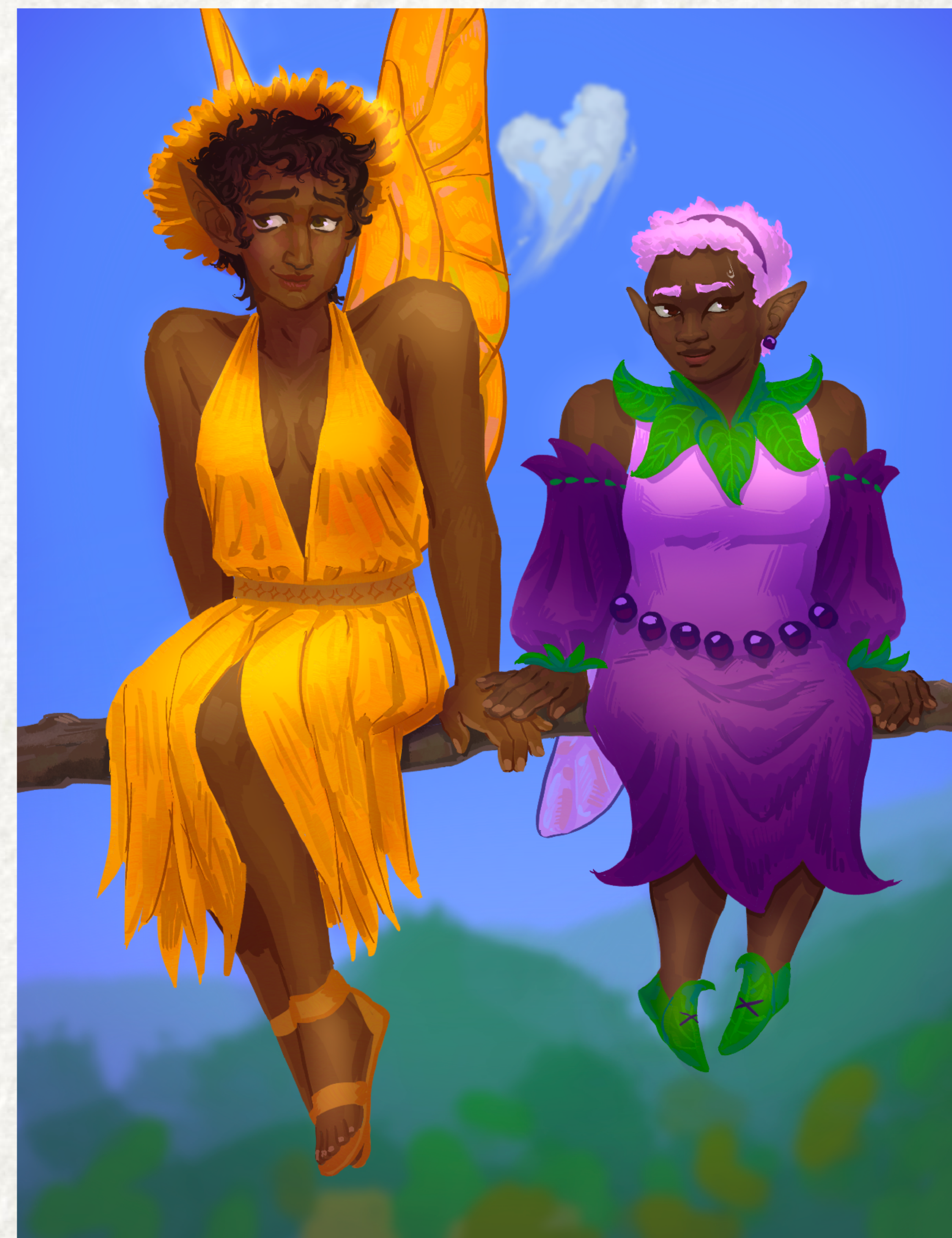
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LANCER STUCK

By Ada

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THERAPIST: Is that all of them?

GNOSTIC: out here, yeah :)

GNOSTIC: im reading two more that made it inside the ship while we were dealing with these guys...

GNOSTIC: i also see a second combat group incoming, seventeen minutes

TRICKSTER: how far out is alpha squad?

GNOSTIC: theyre burning at 2g from three sisters, so about 34 minutes

TRICKSTER: hmm.

GODHEAD: so whats the play june

Our unofficial (but nonetheless inarguably definitive) leader takes a short moment to think before giving us her orders. She used to protest whenever we looked to her for a plan, but these days I think she's come to accept that she's just good at it.

TRICKSTER: okay. godhead, therapist, go in and get the runners before they get to the goods, then get back out here.

TRICKSTER: gnostic and i will hold the line till you get back or alpha squad shows up.

Like I said. She's good at it. Her Tortuga **Ecto-1** could hold back a whole squad but it's not fast enough to catch the ones that got by us, while Jade's Death's Head **between the two walls** really would rather stay out here in the open where she can put her range to good use.

GODHEAD: cool lets split the party and go running off into the abandoned death trap

I ignore Dave's comment with overly practiced ease, and we set off into the wreck of the Lycosa.

THERAPIST: I have ambient thermals, they definitely came this way. Dust disturbance implies more than two though, and they're very obviously headed for our objective.

GODHEAD: awesome

GODHEAD: proceeding at half strength into unknown territory with an unknown number of threats ahead

GODHEAD: although jades not here so really its more like one tenth strength or something

GODHEAD: that fucking railgun

GODHEAD: its unreal the things it does to high end composites and fancy exomat alloys

GODHEAD: not to mention the fleshy bits behind them

GODHEAD: just saying first corp to offer a good way to remove specific images from our memories is going to earn a lifetime of customer loyalty over here

GODHEAD: lets be honest theyd probably just use it for creepy fucking brain fascism

He continues on like that, but I'm not really listening. There's probably a tasteless joke about war crimes in there.

You can use your imagination, just remember he doesn't stop and he doesn't stay on any particular topic for more than a minute or two.

We run down the corridors of this abandoned capital ship together, quick but cautious. Every dark corner could be an ambush point. I notice a steadily rising level of ionizing radiation that's starting to degrade the chatter coming from Dave, and he's only a few meters from me.

THERAPIST: Trickster, Therapist

TRICKSTER: go for tickster.

As expected, the interference is making a mess of Junes's signal.

THERAPIST: We're getting a lot of ambient rads in here, I don't expect coms to last much longer. There also might be more mechs than we suspected. You'll probably be on your own.

THERAPIST: How copy?

TRICKSTER: In our own, solid copy.

TRICKSTER: or good enough copy.

TRICKSTER: stay safe in there.

THERAPIST: Good hunting, Trickster.

We continue following the ambient trail another hundred meters and a dozen sieverts into the wreck, when it splits. Two corridors, and it appears a mech has

recently gone down each. I try to get Dave's attention, but he's mid-verse.

~

GODHEAD: -as advised as my beats (hella ill)

THERAPIST: Godhead.

GODHEAD: yall cant stress me yeah like my brand Im hella chill

THERAPIST: Dave.

GODHEAD: come at me now for my last stand its a fuckin thrill

GODHEAD: yeah sup

THERAPIST: The pirates probably split up here. From the map we were given, both routes could lead to the objective.

GODHEAD: oh

GODHEAD: cool

GODHEAD: were not done splitting up the first time might as well make this a habit

GODHEAD: no biggie were already out of reach of the others

GODHEAD: probably lose connection with each other in a minute

GODHEAD: all good no worries

Despite his protests, Dave shoots off down one corridor, his SSC Metalmark **insufferable prick** disappearing around a corner. He just likes to bitch.

~

Tense minutes pass. My SSC Swallowtail glides in microgravity down huge hallways intended for even bigger machinery to traverse, her four legs deftly catching us on various surfaces and pushing off to accelerate deeper into the shipwreck. The radiation's gotten so bad I've lost all communication with the team, and worse still, whatever's causing it seems to be producing a lot of thermal energy as well. The heat trail I'm following has been completely lost in the noise.

The radiation is playing havoc with sensors in general, but I know I have an advantage there. *Persistent and Coordinated Nonsense* was designed for electronic warfare, so I should still see any pirates before I'm seen in return.

Without a trail to follow, I head to the objective. Our employer lost some sort of valuable cargo on this ship, and we've been hired to extract it safely. Apparently some business rival hired local pirates to try and get to it first.

A warning beep from my mech centers my attention; EM radiation from around the

next intersection. Infrared, coherent beam scatter. Could be a targeting laser, and the more sophisticated sort might be able to get a read of the scattered return. My mech slams to a halt, all four legs stabbing out at once to center us in the hallway.

The light flashes again, stronger this time. Strong coherent segment with a lot of wide scatter. Whatever this is, it's bouncing off a corner in the intersection to send the majority of the beam my way. Whoever is controlling this wants me to know they're there, and they want me to know they can see me.

The light starts pulsing on and off in an arrhythmic pattern that means nothing to me until my systems can find a matching protocol handshake. A point to point comms laser? Indoors? Odd, but apparently true as I hear an unfamiliar feminine voice in my headset.

?: Hello

?: Please Tightbeam On This Protocol In My Direction To Respond

Tightbeam laser communications are used for secure information exchange in space over a long distance, it normally requires direct line of sight to work. Apparently if you know where your receiver

is and have a good enough computer rig to analyze the scatter, you can use it indoors as well; you just have to bounce it around corners just right.

THERAPIST: Received.

THERAPIST: This is Therapist, part of a merc unit out of Hell's Gate.

THERAPIST: Who Is This?

?: I Am A Survivor Of The Lycosa

The ship has been adrift for the better part of a decade, but it's... possible someone survived. If they have access to a cryopod, enough power to keep it running, and an alert to wake them up when someone comes looking...

THERAPIST: Really. You waited to reach out until now because...?

?: I Have Access To The Ships Security Systems But Several Sections Are No Longer Available

?: And The Reactor Leak Is Preventing Outgoing Communications

THERAPIST: So then you figured out this tightbeam trick?

?: I Want To Make A Deal With You

THERAPIST: What sort of deal would that be?

?: I Help You Complete Your Mission

?: And You Get Me Out Of Here

THERAPIST: Deal.

THERAPIST: But first, tell me...

THERAPIST: Do shipwreck ghosts have names?

X

I continue my dive into the wreck, now facilitated by the survivor, Kanaya Maryam. She can see the pirates occasionally and it seems like we were right: they're heading for our payday. My faceless patron has given me an advantage though, and I'm catching up. Some portions of the ship have collapsed, and she can warn me; the pirate ahead has to find out the hard way and double back. Now instead of worrying about walking into an ambush, I can set my own.

THERAPIST: You're pretty good at this handler and support role, Kanaya. What did you do on the ship?

KANAYA: I Was

KANAYA: Ships Navigator Second Class

THERAPIST: Hmm...

KANAYA: Hmm

KANAYA: What Hmm

THERAPIST: Oh nothing. Don't worry about it.

THERAPIST: By the way, have you seen my brother? Callsign Godhead? I can send you IFF and a visual.

KANAYA: Oh Yes Him

KANAYA: The Pirate He Is Chasing Has Gotten Lost After A Few Collapsed Hallways Changed

Their Route

KANAYA: And Dave Has Subsequently Also
Gotten Lost

THERAPIST: Already on a first name basis
with him, I see.

KANAYA: Oh

KANAYA: I Contacted Him To Try And Offer
Guidance

KANAYA: He Accepted But Also Made Some Very
Uncomfortable Suggestions Regarding My
Intentions For Assisting Him

KANAYA: When I Told Him I Was Helping You
As Well His Insinuations Only Got Worse

THERAPIST: My, that's quite a lot of
conversation you've had with him, Kanaya.
Especially since you've practically been
unable to stop talking with me since we
connected.

KANAYA: Are You Also Going To Start
Insinuating That I Am Helping With The
Intention Of Engaging In Romance

THERAPIST: You said it, not me.

KANAYA: I Am Shipwrecked

KANAYA: I Would Like To Think That I Manage
My Priorities Better Than That

KANAYA: And I Know I Can Come Up With Less
Convolutd Ways Of Acquiring A Date

THERAPIST: Is that a proposition?

KANAYA: Oh Look Dave Needs My Help Out Of A
Dead End Again Im Going To Go Talk To Him

KANAYA: Ill Let You Know When The Pirate Is
On His Way To You

KANAYA: Hopefully Youve Abandoned This Line
Of Thought By Then

~

KANAYA: Pirate Incoming

KANAYA: Threat Analysis Says Assault Class

KANAYA: Left Hand Corridor Forty Meters

THERAPIST: I have them on seismic. Jittery
sort, aren't they?

KANAYA: They Do Seem Quite Jumpy

KANAYA: Last Door They Went Through They
Fired Their Shotgun As The Door Opened

KANAYA: I Dont Think They Had Any Reason To
Do So

KANAYA: Thirty Five Meters

THERAPIST: When they reach fifteen I can
hit them around the corner.

KANAYA: Pragmatic

THERAPIST: Well, I might feel bad about
taking someone out like this, but we've
fought them before.

THERAPIST: They have a particularly vicious
streak for a minor gang, and with this one
being so on edge I'm not going to take any
chances.

KANAYA: Thirty Meters

KANAYA: Theyre Slowing Down As They Get
Closer

THERAPIST: Can you give me an update on
Dave? And do you have any way of checking
on my friends at the entrance?

KANAYA: Dave Is Back On Track. I Can't See
Anything Of Your Other Friends, Sorry.

KANAYA: Oh
THERAPIST: What?
KANAYA: Uhm
KANAYA: Nothing
KANAYA: The Pirate Godhead Was Chasing Has
Started Shooting Out My Cameras And Sensors
KANAYA: Holding At Thirty
THERAPIST: Hmm...
KANAYA: What Hmm
THERAPIST/KANAYA: Oh nothing. Oh Nothing
KANAYA: Yes Im Sure
KANAYA: Will Your Initial Volley Be
Sufficient To Eliminate Them
THERAPIST: It'll take a lot of shooting but
I've got a clear advantage.
THERAPIST: Worried about me?
KANAYA: If I Say Yes Are You Going To
Return To Your Insinuations
KANAYA: It Shouldnt Be A Surprise
KANAYA: Youre My Ticket Out Of Here
THERAPIST: Aw, so you choose me over a pack
of bloodthirsty pirates, how romantic.
KANAYA:
KANAYA: Twenty Five Meters
THERAPIST: Target on sensors.
KANAYA: Twenty
KANAYA: Fifteen

The pirate's still in the other hallway, but that won't save him; my twin Oracle machine guns roar with their kinetic ricochet prediction and self correcting bullet systems guiding the shots around the corner, and the larger autogun thumps a

rhythmic pulse of paracausal space bullshit rounds that make right-angle flight corrections to the target. Hunter-lock targeting systems specifically call out weak points in the joints and parts of the armor as they crack open under the torrent. Still, the assault mech isn't a particularly soft target, and my weapons trade a lot of punch for accuracy and the versatility of indirect fire.

The pirate, callsign "Imp" according to scans, charges through my fire and around the corner. I don't let go of the trigger even as my LMGs halt to swap in new belts of ammo. Imp opens fire with their assault rifle, but the shots go wide as a leg buckles. Then the Oracles are back in action, and his armor fails, torn apart through the sheer volume of fire.

Just before the mech succumbs, Imp triggers their rifle-mounted grenade launcher.

KANAYA: Look Out!

A hullbreach bulkhead suddenly drops in front of me, catching the projectile. There's a rumble from the far side, and my sensors show the assault mech has gone cold.

KANAYA: Are You Okay

ROSE: I took a few hits, nothing serious.
ROSE: More importantly, I call bullshit.
KANAYA: Um
KANAYA: What
ROSE: You're not Ship's Navigator Second Class Kanaya Maryam.
KANAYA: What No I
ROSE: You're the ship's NHP pilot.
KANAYA: ...
ROSE: It's been obvious for a while and I'm done dancing around it.
KANAYA: Wait
KANAYA: For How Long
KANAYA: So When You Were Flirting
ROSE: Oh, is that what I was doing?
KANAYA: ...So
KANAYA: When You Were Flirting
KANAYA: You Were Just
KANAYA: What
KANAYA: Testing My Humanity
KANAYA: Did You Know The Whole Time
KANAYA: Was This All A Game To You
ROSE: Kanaya, no. I'm sorry.
ROSE: Honestly.
ROSE: I didn't know, but I suspected.
ROSE: And frankly I was flirting because it was fun.
ROSE: And your humanity or non-humanity is immaterial to that.
ROSE: At the risk of anaphylaxis from all of this excessive sincerity, you're adorable when you get flustered.
KANAYA: Is It Really Possible To Be Allergic To Honesty

ROSE: ...It's a family affliction.
KANAYA: Hm

~

That grenade wrecked the bulkhead hydraulics, so Kanaya is guiding me on an alternate route. Dave's back on track as well. The pirate he was chasing has disappeared somewhere in a section the NHP's systems can't connect to.

NHP, Non-Human Person. Humanity stretched across the galaxy and found no alien intelligences, so we created our own. Hyperdimensional entities of pure possibility, trained and constrained to a human level of understanding, a process that produces individual people with their own agency and desires and experiences. In some places, they're treated as gods, in others, as expendable tools. In the backwater system of Calliope where survival is a struggle for everybody, they're just people. An NHP might be a bunch of impossible math stuffed into a magic box, but that's not really any stranger than most people who come here. As long as they make themselves useful, they're as welcome as anybody else... and they're certainly good at being useful. NHPs run many of the settlements in Calliope, manage capital

ship operations, and can even be loaded into a mech to serve as a co-pilot.

Kanaya can monitor every system she has a connection to instantaneously, while holding concurrent conversations with Dave and I, all while tracking four mechs through this labyrinth. It's not even a challenge. What she can't do is convincingly pretend to be a human while pulling off such feats.

ROSE: So.

ROSE: Our deal.

ROSE: You knew that it would eventually require us to extract your casket...

ROSE: Why maintain the deception?

KANAYA: I

KANAYA: Thought That Maybe It Would Allow Us To Maintain A Rapport

ROSE: You thought that lying about your identity would help endear you to me?

KANAYA: I Thought That You Would Be More Inclined To Trust A Human In Mortal Peril But When You Put It Like That I Do Start To See A Flaw In The Approach

ROSE: Two flaws.

KANAYA: Oh

KANAYA: I Hope You Arent Talking About The Flirtation

KANAYA: Though Unexpected And Quite Derailing I Still Wouldn't Consider That A Flaw In My Plan

KANAYA: More Like An Unexpected Bonus

ROSE: Ah, finally finding it in you to flirt back? Good girl.

ROSE: But no.

ROSE: Your second flaw is that you're an abysmal liar.

ROSE: So let's dispense with pretense.

ROSE: You hired us for this job.

KANAYA: What

ROSE: I never told you my name was Rose.

ROSE: You knew we're equipped to exfil an NHP.

ROSE: And you've been guiding me to our employer's cargo objective, which happens to be suspiciously far from the actual cargo bays and certainly seems like a ship's NHP core.

KANAYA: That Is Certainly A Conclusion Youve Arrived At

ROSE: The only part I don't get is how you set up the contract.

KANAYA: Therapist

ROSE: If you had external communications you could have talked to us on the way in...

KANAYA: Rose

ROSE: And you could have given me a sitrep on June and Jade.

ROSE: Yeah, sup?

KANAYA: That Pirate Dave Was After Has Returned To Connected Portions Of The Ship

KANAYA: And Theyre Perilously Close To My Core

ROSE: Shit, can you slow them down at all? Use more of those bulkheads?

KANAYA: I Am Trying

KANAYA: It Will Buy You Some Time But I Estimate That Youll Reach My Chamber Only A Minute Or Two Before They Do

KANAYA: Dave Will Arrive Slightly Later

ROSE: On my way.

KANAYA: Please Hurry

KANAYA: I Suspect They Might Not Be Alone

KANAYA: I Can See Them Stop Occasionally

And Use Some Form Of Sign Language

KANAYA: I Might Have Missed A Third Pirate

Since They Started Shooting Cameras

ROSE: Probably active camouflage.

ROSE: We only saw two pirates go in.

ROSE: Fantastic.

ROSE: At least I can hold them off until

Godhead shows up and makes it an even fight.

ROSE: Actually...

ROSE: One question; do you think you're compatible with ATHENA-class NHP hardware?



I get there with just enough time to plan some sort of defense. Kanaya's initial logs suggest the pirate she can see is a Berserker threat class, extremely dangerous in close. And they might have backup with some sort of cloaking tech. I've got more than a few tricks of my own though.

ROSE: Settling in?

KANAYA: Yes

KANAYA: I Dont Like That Ive Lost My Eyes Across The Ship But I See The Tactical Advantages Of This Plan

ROSE: And you're okay with being my copilot?

ROSE: It's kind of necessary to mount you into my mech, but you don't have to fight if you don't want to. I've got this.

KANAYA: I Appreciate The Concern But I Am Quite Willing To Help Fight

KANAYA: We Stand A Better Chance Of Victory Together

KANAYA: And At The Risk Of Triggering Your Sincerity Allergy I Have To Admit That I Kind Of Hoped This Would Happen

ROSE: Oh?

KANAYA: Okay

KANAYA: Like You Suggested All Pretense Should Be Safely Relegated To Trash Collection Services

KANAYA: So I Am Forced To Admit

KANAYA: I Read Your Writing

ROSE: My tactical combat breakdowns, my after action reports, my wizard stories, or my horrible romantic fiction?

KANAYA: ...

KANAYA: Yes

ROSE: I'm sorry.

KANAYA: Sorry If This Is An Inappropriately Distracting Time To Reveal That Information

KANAYA: Hold On

KANAYA: Sensors Detect That The Camera Just Outside Has Been Destroyed

KANAYA: Theyre Here

The berserker pirate comes into the NHP core and finds nothing. Their friend, if there is one, still hasn't shown their face, but they aren't the only ones with active camo. My tac-cloak only works while I hold still, but it's fantastic for moments like this.

ROSE: Oh, they found the empty casket slot.

KANAYA: And There

KANAYA: Thats Not Union Common

ROSE: No, it's a local dialect. Calliopean sign language focuses more on single hand signs.

ROSE: Dave will be here soon, right?

KANAYA: Best Estimate

KANAYA: And Im Significantly More Sure About My Estimates With This Platform

KANAYA: He Will In Sensor Range In Forty Seconds

ROSE: As soon as he is, activate your ATHENA system.

ROSE: If they try to leave-

KANAYA: They Are

KANAYA: Right Now

ROSE: Never mind, we go now!

KANAYA: Engaging Simulacrum

My screens flood with information, as the ATHENA systems allow Kanaya to generate a perfect simulation of the room and the area outside. Together, we can see everything. The previously hidden specter class mech "Basilisk" is as clearly visible

as his berserker partner "Ogre". I can see every piece of equipment on each of them, as obvious as if I had built them myself. I can see both pilots; every pore and hair on their faces. Kanaya automatically pulls information on each from wanted records. Apparently both men have long and sordid careers full of violent piracy.

As Kanaya generates this intel, I'm busy firing off electronic system invasions against the berserker. His pathetic ICE drops like paper and his computer systems are flooded with random data, choice insults, and some rather self-indulgent fanfiction. Still, I hold my fire. They know I'm here, but not where. I can buy a few more seconds for Dave to arrive if I stay under my cloak.

Both pirates start scanning the room, though Ogre's besieged computers don't have a hope in hell. Luckily he starts moving to the far end of the room from us, with a stumbling gait as the malicious data plays with his controls. Basilisk, however, moves closer, scanning carefully for a foe he knows is there.

KANAYA: He Sees Us

The specter whips a monowire sword at our mech, striking deep into armor. Time to fuck shit up.

KANAYA: *Solid Lock*

Kanaya's systems provide target locks on both pirates as the simulacrum feeds data straight into my guns. Persistant's reactor core whines under sudden load as I spike an overcharge for more power. I pull the trigger, focusing everything on Basilisk. Specter type mechs are usually a lot softer than the assault from earlier or the berserker across the room, and my three barrels of precision guided kinetic mayhem tear it apart. At this range, with all this data, I don't even need to aim. That's good, because my other hand is busy sending a wave of steaming fresh bullshit into Ogre's computer.

KANAYA: *Target Down*

KANAYA: *Next*

ROSE: *On it.*

Targets fitting the berserker profile combine powerful melee attacks with high speed and decent armor, but that usually leaves them vulnerable to electronic warfare. Slowed by my digital assault, Ogre's charge is more of a stumble through my torrent of fire. Still, he's nearly as tough as that assault, a lot closer, and I'm stuck in a corner. I could try to move, but my cloak would fail and the bending optical patterns still provide

some protection.

I don't let up until the oracles are at risk of overheating, and while they cycle the autogun continues to blast. I have to keep the datastorm rolling too; berserker systems actively manage their defense and would allow him to shield vital components. It's all either of us can do with the thing bearing down on us. Ogre reaches point blank range, and winds up a huge swing with that ax.

Oracle machine guns come back online just as the berserker starts hacking away at us. This close in, the guns have more trouble tracking, but his own attack goes wide, following the wrong distorted image of the cloak. I can only continue to fire as he winds up again. The next crushing blow hits the autogun, and it goes silent. He swings again and again, his mech glowing red hot from a stressed out reactor.

It's not just the pressure of all these attacks causing him to overheat. My e-war code is causing his reactor's cooling systems to fail. One more little push... I send a line of commands to his coolant control system. To the computer, it's nonsense. Translated as text though, it's human readable:

Only a simple observation so blunt and uncharacteristically jejune for the lauded sage it was breathtaking in its selfevidency. "We're going to need more wands." (Wow. Think of something better.)

The entire text of Complacency of the Learned causes the coolant system to, frankly, lose its entire shit. Steam blasts from the berserker as its power core opens up in a desperate attempt to avoid complete meltdown. My guns chew Ogre's heart out.

That might be the nicest compliment my writing has ever received.

KANAYA: Target Down

KANAYA: Sensors Clear

KANAYA: Dave Is Here

ROSE: Good work, Kanaya.

KANAYA: Oh

KANAYA: Uhm

KANAYA: Thank You

KANAYA: You Did Well Too

DAVE: hey

DAVE: im here

DAVE: oh shit what happened are you okay

ROSE: We're okay. Nothing that can't be fixed.

DAVE: and the macguffin? i cant help but notice this doesnt look like a fucking cargo bay

ROSE: Yes. Dave, allow me to introduce you to our objective, employer, and my new

partner, Kanaya.

KANAYA: Hello

DAVE: oh shit

KANAYA: Uhm

KANAYA: Rose

KANAYA: I Feel Like I Should Clarify A Few Things Though

ROSE: Yes?

KANAYA: So

KANAYA: First

KANAYA: When You Say Im Youre New Partner

KANAYA: Are You Suggesting That You Are Open To Continuing This Arrangement

ROSE: I think this relationship has gotten off to a wonderful start.

ROSE: And I'd like to see where it goes from here.

ROSE: I'm willing to continue this if you are.

KANAYA: Oh

KANAYA: Yes I Would Like That

KANAYA: And I Feel The Same

ROSE: Good.

DAVE: goddamn

DAVE: so i get lost for five minutes and you find yourself a date

KANAYA: I

KANAYA: Is That

KANAYA: Uh I Mean

ROSE: Kanaya.

KANAYA: We Just Met And

ROSE: Kanaya.

KANAYA: Yes What

ROSE: He's teasing us both, you can safely

ignore him.

KANAYA: Oh

DAVE: hahaha oh wow

ROSE: So what's second?

KANAYA: What

ROSE: You said 'first', implying you had a second point to make.

KANAYA: Oh Right

KANAYA: Well

KANAYA: Second

KANAYA: I Didnt Employ You

ROSE: ...what.

DAVE: oh shit

DAVE: so our payday is based on delivering your new girlfriend to a nameless weirdo who called her lost cargo

DAVE: like property that they owned

ROSE: Dave!

DAVE: just saying

DAVE: we aint gonna do that shit right

DAVE: obviously

DAVE: lets get the fuck out of here and tell june we gotta break the contract

~

KANAYA: Are You Really Willing To Break A Contract For Me

ROSE: If it's what you want.

ROSE: We're certainly not going to turn you over until we know more about what's going on.

ROSE: And you have no idea who might have

hired us?

KANAYA: None

KANAYA: My Memories Before The Wreck Are Spotty At Best But Im Fairly Certain I Was Not Someones Property

KANAYA: If I

KANAYA: Uh

KANAYA: If I Choose To Not Go With Whoever It Is

ROSE: You're welcome to stay with me as long as you like, Kanaya.

KANAYA: Thank You Rose

ROSE: By the way...

ROSE: How did you know my name?

KANAYA: Communication Probe

KANAYA: Downloaded A Lot Of Local Data Before I Lost Signal

ROSE: I guess that explains it. My identity is plastered over the muse network.

ROSE: Which reminds me, we have a strong connection now...

KANAYA: Thats One Word For It

KANAYA: I Didnt Expect To Be Rescued At All Let Alone To Meet Someone So Alluring

ROSE: Oh my, miss Maryam, I'm flattered.

ROSE: I hate to break it to you but I was referring to the high bandwidth connection you have being installed in my mech.

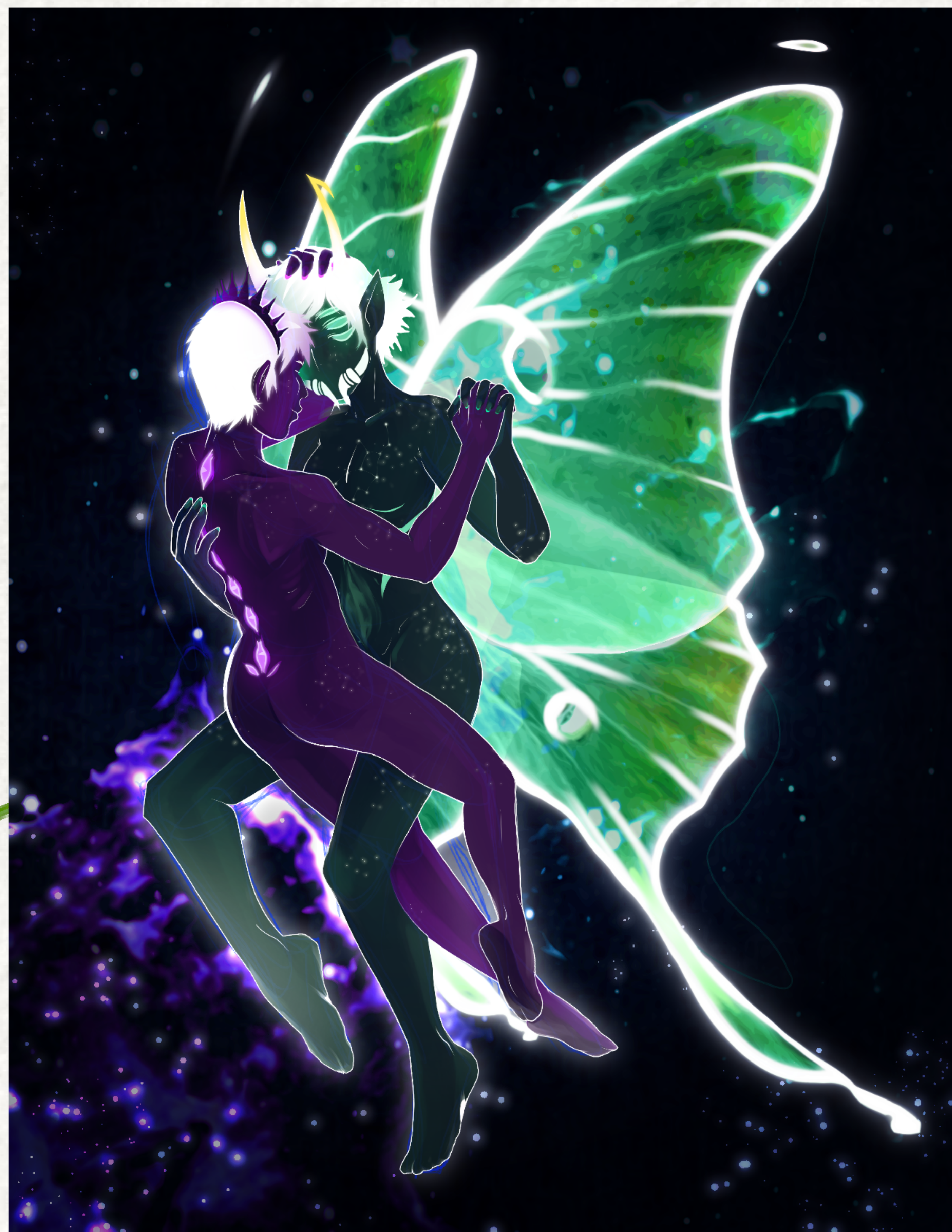
KANAYA: Oh

ROSE: So if you want, you can display your avatar and I can repay that compliment.

KANAYA: ...Oh

KANAYA: Well Then

FIN



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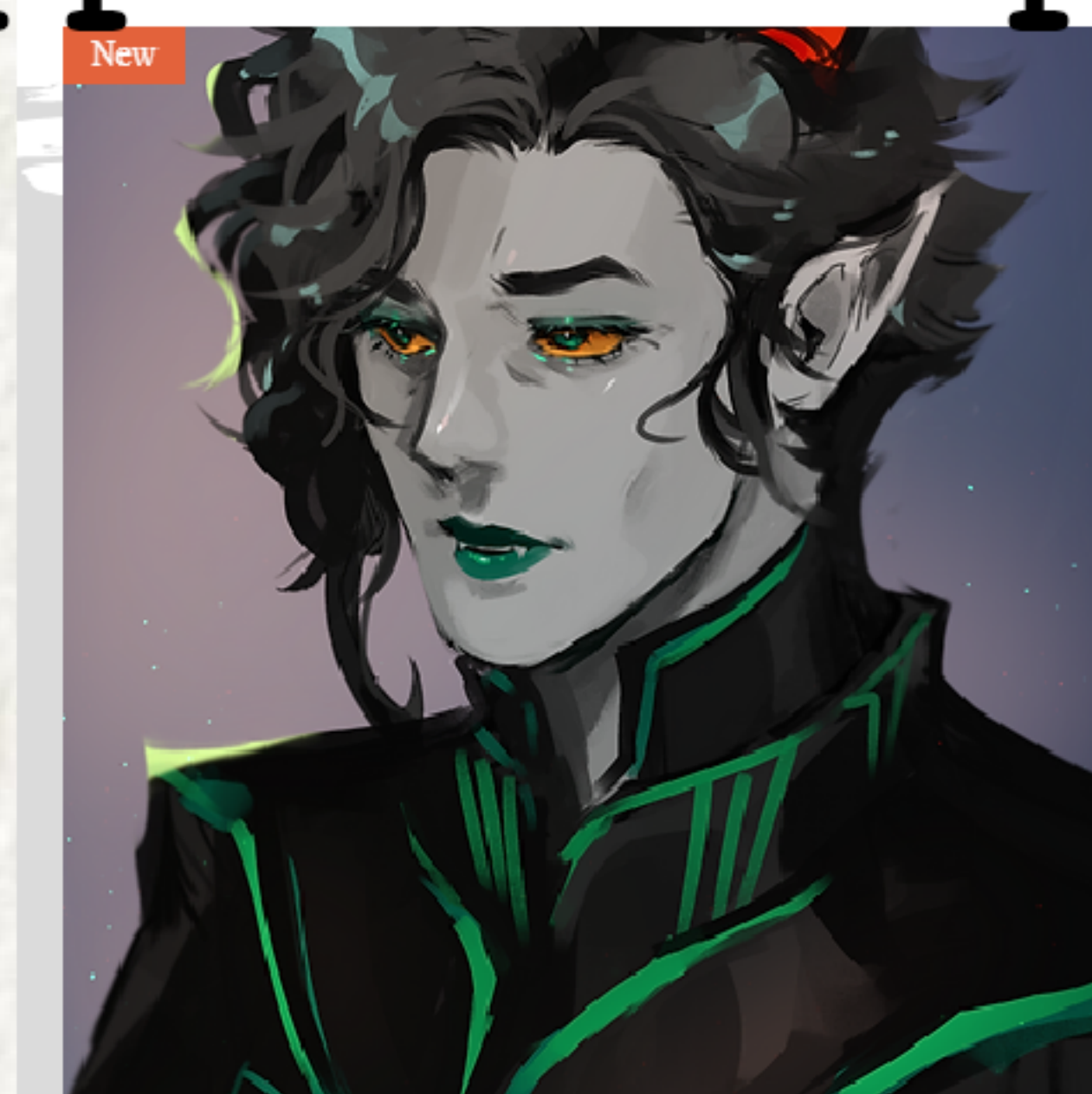


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